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## **TOM SCOTT AS RELIGIOUS POET: “THE PASCHAL CANDILL” IN CONTEXT**

*Richie McCaffery*

The poetic output of the Scottish poet Tom Scott (1918-1995) is a study in adaptation, growth and meliorism. Inherent in this was the almost single-minded search in his work for a “new Jerusalem,” which connoted a world without warfare and greed, predicated on a peaceful co-habitation of the earth between the human and animal “kingrik”: “indeed new hevin / new earth.”<sup>1</sup> In his work, the earth is seen as a matriarchal “Goddess,” preferred over Christianity’s patriarchal view of ‘God’, except in “The Paschal Candill,” the poem which is the special focus of this essay. Indeed, Scott’s lifelong goal as a poet was to articulate a “good society,” “a much better society, Utopia, the new Jerusalem.”<sup>2</sup> More attention has been paid to the various creative stages of Scott’s life (such as his role in the New Apocalypse movement; his early translations of European poets into Scots; and his ongoing engagement with the epic form) than has been paid to his spiritual or religious development, which is marked by a similar pattern of change. Scott’s creative and spiritual life as a poet was an evolutionary process punctuated by particular watershed moments that are brought together most notably when he experienced what can only be described as a religious epiphany inspiring his poem “The Paschal Candill,” where he grappled publicly with the nature of his faith. Taken as a whole, Scott’s poetry is the work of an individual trying to protect the world and its “sacral” beings. As such, Carla Sassi has hailed Scott as “outstanding and outstandingly committed.”<sup>3</sup>

Religion was a continual presence in Scott’s life. As a child and young adult when he worked as a house painter, Scott grew up in a poor but highly literate working class household; indeed in interview Scott stressed

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Scott, *An Ode til New Jerusalem* (Edinburgh: M. Macdonald, 1956), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Scott, “Interview with Joy Hendry,” *Agenda: Tom Scott Special Issue*, 30:4-31:1 (1992): 42-72 (46).

<sup>3</sup> Carla Sassi, “Tom Scott,” *Zed0*, 23 (2008): 59-61 (59).

that he had experienced poverty. As Robert Calder has pointed out, Scott's childhood was steeped in the Protestant Christian Socialism of the Clydeside.<sup>4</sup> From an early age Scott was exposed to a belief system that was infused with religion as well as politics, both of which would offer him sustenance as a poet. His later poetry, such as *Brand the Builder*, shows a great sympathy for the shipbuilders of the Clyde, and all of his work, from his early New Apocalypse poems to *Views from Myeloma*, is characterised by a continued concern for downtrodden or disenfranchised people. In the 1950s, alongside various upheavals in his personal life (including a love affair that will be explored more fully below), Scott visited Rome, and at St. Peter's he experienced the epiphany that would lead him to write "The Paschal Candill." This poem put him at odds with many, but not all writers of his generation; despite this whirlwind engagement with Catholicism, he never formally converted to Rome, and he eventually turned his back on Roman Catholicism.

In later life, right up to his last illness, Scott declared that he had no organised or official religious faith. He treated his Roman Catholic mistake with "The Paschal Candill" as an aberration, but that does not mean we should dismiss this poem or the idea that Scott, a self-professed atheist who wanted "nothing to do with dogmatic religion" (Scott 1992, 51), was also in some way also a religious poet. As Thomas Crawford once commented, his prognostications, social commentary and pronouncements were like those of a preacher.<sup>5</sup> Scott knew that he was unlikely to convert everyone to his political vision, yet he still persevered, and that is only possible with some inner reservoir of faith. Perhaps ultimately Scott's poetry has much more to do with a belief in the betterment of the physical world and with materialism and rationality than with the emotions and enigmas of Roman Catholicism. From his upbringing onwards he had felt keenly the need for a fairer and better society and was perfectly willing to turn his poetry over to propaganda for that cause. His faith could perhaps be best described as a post-Christian, socialist humanism shaped by an awareness of "history as determined by struggle in time" and the "earthly fight to gain a better and juster world."<sup>6</sup> Hayden Murphy suggests that Scott's secular evangelism is paradoxically "more holy and sacred than the

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Calder, "An Overview of Tom Scott's Poetry," *Chapman*, 47-48(1987), 28-34 (32).

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Crawford, "Tom Scott: From Apocalypse to *Brand*," *Akros*, 11 [31] (1976): 57-69 (69).

<sup>6</sup> Carla Sassi, "Tom Scott: A New Humanism," *Agenda: Tom Scott Special Issue*, 30:4-31:1 (1992): 165-172 (166).

hatred fulminated by the battling creeds.”<sup>7</sup> If in reading his poetry we focus on Scott’s engagement with, and belief in, a better material and spiritual world for all, then we find no wavering in his stance, no apostasy from the cause.

Despite Scott’s great overarching social programme as a poet, he is now one of the more neglected members of the second wave of the Scottish Literary Renaissance. John Herdman has written that while Scott was a poet possessed of a “largeness of spirit,” his work has been “stubbornly neglected and seriously undervalued.”<sup>8</sup> Part of the reason for this neglect could be attributed to the perceived difficulty of his long epic poems such as *The Dirty Business* and *The Tree* (a study of creation and evolution seen as a tree of life). Herdman suggests that his uncompromising and “thrown” integrity may have militated against his success as a poet, but that it was so much a part of his nature that he could not do anything else. While the religious aspect of his work and life has long been unstressed, it is doubtful that his neglect is directly attributable to his more overtly religious poetry. Scott’s Clydeside socialism and anti-war stance strike a much louder and more insistent note throughout his work and could perhaps more easily be blamed for his neglect. While Scott never formally converted to Catholicism, he was not alone as a Scottish writer in considering it. Although his period as a poet coincided with increasing materialism and atheism or agnosticism in the arts, other writers such as George Mackay Brown and Muriel Spark did convert. In her article on George Mackay Brown’s short story “Celia,” Linden Bicket has shown how George Mackay Brown was moved to soften or even repress the Catholic themes in his short story “Celia.”<sup>9</sup> Bicket also claims that the alcoholic prostitute protagonist is perhaps loosely based on Brown’s own love affair with the artist Stella Cartwright (1937-1985) and the sense of guilt they both shared for their reckless, bohemian lifestyles. As discussed below, Cartwright also had a love affair with Tom Scott at the height of his engagement with Catholicism and is said to have partly inspired “The Paschal Candill.”

However, it is certain that Scott’s Catholicism did not make him a popular name in some circles. Hugh MacDiarmid can be seen as a major influence on Scott’s decision, in the 1950s, to abandon the lyric poem in favour of the epic. Scott announced that the “lyric has been ridden to

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<sup>7</sup> Hayden Murphy, “Tom Scott: Man of Properties,” *Agenda: Tom Scott Special Issue*, 30:4-31:1 (1992):73-83 (82).

<sup>8</sup> John Herdman, “Memories of Tom Scott,” *Scotia Review*, (1995): 6-7 (6).

<sup>9</sup> Linden Bicket, “George Mackay Brown’s ‘Celia’: The Creative Conversion of a Catholic Heroine,” *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 40 (2014): 167–182:  
<https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol40/iss1/15/>.

death” and that “our time calls for a public and epic poetry,” which mirrors MacDiarmid’s claim that “the lyric is hopeless in the modern world.”<sup>10</sup> However, the fundamental difference between MacDiarmid and Scott is not so much the presence of religion or religious imagery in their longer works, but the very belief in that religion. In Walter Perrie’s 1975 interview with MacDiarmid, published as *Metaphysics and Poetry*, MacDiarmid expresses his discomfort with being labelled as “a Christian poet without knowing it” simply because of his “compassionate spirit.” MacDiarmid maintains that he is an “atheist” and a “materialist.” His belief in the “transcendental” comes out of “the seeds of things” and the fact that “only a small part of reality is accessible to the human mind.”<sup>11</sup> Scott later made clear MacDiarmid’s disdain for religious poetry springing from personal, doctrinal faith, telling Joy Hendry:

I sent a copy (of *The Paschal Candill*) to Grieve and he wrote back and said “There’s nothing much to it at all. I just don’t see what all the fuss is about.”... Eventually he said to me, “I don’t give a damn what you say, Tom, as long as you’re on this damned religiose thing you won’t even get a pass mark from me” (Scott, as in n. 2 above, 56).

In the same interview Scott also goes to great pains to criticise “The Paschal Candill,” explaining that, in writing about the spiritual and aesthetic experience of Roman Catholicism, he was “out of [his] depth,” and that the religious awakening that gave rise to the poem had “nothing to do with dogmatic religion” (*ibid.*, 51). Scott suppressed the publication of the poem, out of embarrassment for being “a radical” and “a Marxist” (*ibid.*), until the early 1990s when it was first published in its entirety in an edition of *Agenda*. It is clear, however, that Scott had a love-hate relationship with the poem. In 1972, in a letter to David Morrison, editor of *Scotia Review*, Scott claims that “The Paschal Candill” is a “good poem” that was spoiled by “those who will try anything to suppress certain poems of mine ... to try and murder [them] before [they get] to the people.”<sup>12</sup> This poem was therefore not just about Scott’s personal tussle with faith but was also intended to be read by “the people.” “The Paschal Candill,” occupying a unique position in Scott’s oeuvre, was a poem subject to both external and internal censorship.

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<sup>10</sup> Tom Scott, “Some Poets of the Scottish Renaissance,” *Poetry*, 88:1 (1956): 43-47 (47); MacDiarmid, as in n. 11 below, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Hugh MacDiarmid, *Metaphysics and Poetry* (Hamilton: Lothlorien Publications, 1975), 22.

<sup>12</sup> Tom Scott to David Morrison, November 9, 1972, from the online archive *A Selection of Letters from Tom Scott and Alan Bold* (posted November 25, 2010): [http://davidmorrisonshortstories.blogspot.be/2010/11/normal-0-false-false-false-engb-x-none\\_7958.html](http://davidmorrisonshortstories.blogspot.be/2010/11/normal-0-false-false-false-engb-x-none_7958.html).

The purpose of this article is to reposition this problematic poem at the heart of Scott's work and show, through a close reading, that it is in fact shot through with a number of Scott's key poetic themes, despite the different approach of favouring a "patriarchal" (Catholic) as opposed to "matriarchal" (poetic/materialist) belief system. "The Paschal Candill" is a poem that many critics have have politely avoided or only mentioned in passing. The most sustained engagement with the work thus far seems to be William Calin's sensitive two-page reading in his book *Minority Literatures and Modernism* (2000). Calin finds it unusual that Scott never rejected his earlier work, from the New Apocalypse onwards (unlike his contemporary Norman MacCaig who violently repudiated his writing from the forties), but did suppress "The Paschal Candill":

It is nonetheless striking that the greatest Christian poem of the Scottish Literary Renaissance should have been disavowed by its author, and that the author, while claiming to revere Jesus, denies that he ever was, or is, a Christian.<sup>13</sup>

This article, then, will also seek to determine whether Scott can be labelled, as Thomas Crawford has said, a "genuinely religious poet," and if so, what type of religion Scott's work belongs to, if not orthodox Christian creed (Crawford, as in n. 5, 69).

"The Paschal Candill," which Scott described as "my first technically challenging work in Scots," should be seen alongside a long poem by Scott from the same period titled *An Ode til New Jerusalem*.<sup>14</sup> Both poems appeared in the mid-1950s and represent his attempts to break out of the lyrical and translator modes he had previously been working in. Both poems are precursors of the much longer epic poems that Scott would come to write and value more highly than anything else he had written. The poems lean heavily on religious imagery, terminology and language, and they are written in a style and "orthography" that owes much to Scott's passionate reading of the Renaissance Scots makars (*ibid.*). *An Ode til New Jerusalem*, for example, is laid out with two stanzas per page, tapering and expanding in an hourglass shape, implying that the time is nigh for change. The layout suggests that time is fleeting, and brings to mind the *memento mori* of medieval Christian imagery, while it conjures up the appearance of a poem by the Scottish makars like William Dunbar, on whom Scott wrote his Edinburgh PhD thesis. *An Ode til New Jerusalem* is a prayer to the reader, relating a divine vision of what a paradise (a veritable "New

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<sup>13</sup> Calin, William, *Minority Languages and Modernism: Scots, Breton and Occitan, 1920-1990* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press (2000), 56.

<sup>14</sup> Tom Scott, "Introduction," in *The Collected Shorter Poems of Tom Scott* (London and Edinburgh: Agenda/Chapman Publications, 1993), 9-10 (9).

Jerusalem”) the world could be, if only people learned to put aside their differences and cease their worship of profit and money through greed:

When beautie, good, truth, holiness  
 Sall rule in fowrfauld sway.  
 Syne we’ll ken new being,  
 New birds sing in  
 Dawn as nicht is fleeand,  
 Ilk day bring in  
 When Love is given  
 Its worth –  
 Indeed new hevin,  
 New earth.<sup>15</sup>

Comparing this with an opening stanza from “The Paschal Candill,” we immediately see a similar rhyme scheme and the overarching idea that light is on its way to banish the darkness and that a greater truth has been glimpsed:

As a ship steers by a starn  
 That midnight clouds are nou and syne obscurand  
 The risen Lord is born  
 Crouned with Adam’s thorn,  
 The fallen fruit back til its tree restorand.<sup>16</sup>

William Calin comments that that Scott “exploits sacred imagery in his quest for social justice” (Calin, p. 59). It is no coincidence that the ritual of the Paschal candle is to absolve the sins of the observer/participant/believer and that Scott, as the subject of the religious epiphany and shriving, is also the voice delivering the lesson and preaching a gospel of “Love.” It could be argued that from Scott’s earliest work, to his last poem sequence, the unfinished *Views from Myeloma*, he sees the material world and the threats posed to that world in largely religious terms. As such, his notion of “idolatry” becomes that of technology; the science behind the atom bomb (as is seen in *The Dirty Business*) is greed, money and capitalism (the “Cursus Mundi”); and the composition and delivery of poetry become his sacrament. Life in all its forms, not God on high, is to be venerated: in “The Real Muse” the speaker proclaims “from earth mak you immortal images.”<sup>17</sup> This explains why, in certain of his poems, Scott gives his blessing and in others he unleashes his wrath, rather like a creator on a microcosmic scale. In *At the Shrine o the Unkent Sodger*, for example, written over ten years after “The Paschal Candill,” Scott takes aim at humanity’s endless capacity for waging war and argues that this “wes oor

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<sup>15</sup> Scott, as in n. 1 above, 11.

<sup>16</sup> Tom Scott, “The Paschal Candill,” *Agenda: Tom Scott Special Issue*, 30:4-31:1 (1992): 16-30 (17).

<sup>17</sup> Scott, “The Real Muse,” *ibid.*, 11.

Original Sin.”<sup>18</sup> He points out, in an evangelical tone, what is at stake and what stands to be gained if we change our ways:

... the real britherheid o real men,  
the co-operation o real states and peoples  
... This is oor primal needs,  
this is the good city, the longed-for New Jerusalem,  
never quite to be reached, nor yet lost sight o (Scott, *Unkent*, 16).

And:

Man discrucified, his cross uncrossed,  
the Son o’ Man’s kingrik come on earth  
and aa the millennial Calvary o War  
be as obsolete as crucifixion is.  
... new hevin, new earth, a new mankind (*ibid.*, 20).

Likewise, “The Ship”, one of the longer, but not epic, poems that Scott valued most highly, is quick to show us the damnation that awaits if we stubbornly refuse to learn from our sins and mistakes. In “The Ship,” Scott draws upon his early work in translating Dante, whom he describes as a writer of “propaganda for the kirk,”<sup>19</sup> and shows how allegories can be found within a material reality, that we no longer need to rely on mythology and the teachings of the Bible. Scott called this “polysemous veritism” in contrast to Dante’s “polysemous allegory.”<sup>20</sup> As such, Christopher Whyte suggests, Scott’s poetry voyages into “reality and works out meanings in it” instead of imposing “an abstract form on reality.”<sup>21</sup> The trope used in “The Ship” is that of the sinking Titanic, riven and torn apart by disastrous class differences:

We follaed up the Ship wi ae gret war,  
Refused to change, sae anither follaed that,  
And refusan to change, a cauld war follaed that,  
And we stand the-day like a scorpion ringed wi fire,  
Ready to sting our racial sel til death  
Raither nor brek throu the bourgeois creed  
That God and wise men clearly hae condemned  
As utterly unreal and moribund.<sup>22</sup>

It is worth pointing out that in this extract, Scott places God above the creed that has been perverted, and thus above blame. The figure of God

<sup>18</sup> Tom Scott, *At the Shrine o the Unkent Sodger* (Preston: Akros Publications, 1968), 11.

<sup>19</sup> W. S. Milne, “Keeping the Lines Open: The Work of Tom Scott,” *Agenda*, 30:4-31:1 (1992): 90-95 (95).

<sup>20</sup> Tom Scott, “Lament for the Great Music,” *Agenda*, 5:4-6:1 (1967): 19-34 (20).

<sup>21</sup> Christopher Whyte, “Tom Scott: An Imagined World,” *Chapman*, 47-48 (1987): 7-14 (10).

<sup>22</sup> Tom Scott, “The Ship,” in *The Ship and Ither Poems* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 43-64 (63-64).



and Christ, his worldly, material manifestation, are treated in a highly reverential light in all of his poems. His poem "The Discrucifixion" shows Scott's anger especially at the manipulation and misuse of Christ's image and iconography. In seeing Christ as "discrucified," all that he stands for is reversed, so that for some he becomes the "stoodge o evil" in an era where "values [have gone] tapsalteerie."<sup>23</sup> In "The Discrucifixion" Scott urges the "Paschal Candill" to be melted down, as it is "owre late to save whit time's corruptit" (*ibid.*, 25). While this might strike a more pessimistic note, it does show that the poet was willing to use the "polysemous veritism" of the Paschal candle ritual in his other poems, thus suggesting that it was an image in which he had some residual faith.

Even the poets he chose to translate into Scots in his early career (such as Villon, who spoke out for the criminals about to be hung) show a preoccupation with sin, Eden and the Fall, repentance and religion. Take for instance the post-Catholic angst of Baudelaire, in Whyte's phrase the "great pioneer [of] exploring evil" (Whyte, *loc. cit.*). In Scott's translation of "L'Albatros" as "The Albatross," we see another example of his polysemous veritism, showing how the poet longs for heaven and wants to soar spiritually, but instead is more like the wounded albatross, in Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," who is exiled from the sky and doomed to the fate of an ignorant crowd:

The poet's sometimes like this prince o the clouds  
wha haunts the storm, derides the arrow's flight;  
exiled aground, amang the jeerin crowds,  
his giant wings prevent 'is walking right.<sup>24</sup>

However, even before the publication of his translations, Scott's earliest New Apocalyptic poetry also shows a clear awareness of the presence of sacredness or holiness on earth. Take for instance "The Canteen," which has a direct relation to "The Paschal Candill" in that it also discusses the figure of "the Messiah in dirty dungarees."<sup>25</sup> On a surface reading "The Canteen" is merely an account of Scott's wartime daily routine of going to get his food in the canteen. However, one day he spots "this boy in dirty dungarees" who stands out from the "white-khaki-clad soldiers" and the "white-dressed white actresses" and the speaker finds his very presence

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<sup>23</sup> Tom Scott, "The Discrucifixion," in Tom Scott, Somhairle MacGill-Eain, and Hamish Henderson, *Etruscan Reader II: Pervigilium Scotiae=Scotland's Vigil* (Buckfastleigh: etruscan books, 1997), 25-27 (26).

<sup>24</sup> Tom Scott, "The Albatross," in *Etruscan Reader II*, 10. .

<sup>25</sup> Tom Scott, "The Paschal Candill," *Agenda*, 30:4-31:1 (1992): 29.

"like forgotten words, a bit puzzling."<sup>26</sup> In all of the cleanliness of the soldiers "this towsy-haired boy disturbs me." It is only through reading around the poem that it becomes apparent that the poet not only sees an image of the eternal underdog representing the Africans he befriended during his time in the army, but believes the boy is Christ or the "second coming" himself, set to die in the human-made catastrophe of war. "The Canteen" in fact represents one of Scott's earliest religious poems, in the sense of venerating humanity in all its forms, and as such it reminds us of his maxim that "we must think people, not statistics" (Hendry, *ibid.*, 220).

As we have seen so far, Scott takes issue with the "anti-life phenomena in society", that is, the corporations and governments that enable the world to be exploited and polluted and which regularly wage wars.<sup>27</sup> At his funeral service, Joy Hendry paid tribute to Scott's "thorough-going although not conventional religiosity" and said that he made an impossible task for himself in trying to transfer the values of "the Holy City", or his "New Jerusalem," to the earth, and that he would always fall short.<sup>28</sup> In all of Scott's work there is an awareness that the poet cannot physically enact change. He can act in an oracular fashion, like an Old Testament figure, because "prophetic" writing was for Scott writing that is "socially critical," the purpose being to warn people of coming disasters (Scott, "Interview," as in n. 2 above, 43). Scott considered himself "the guardian of values, and all values are spiritual," for "poets are not unacknowledged legislators but ought to be acknowledged counsellors, men of values and vision."<sup>29</sup> In interviews Scott went as far as suggesting that poets were potentially saviours of humankind, in that they should be consulted in matters relating to the political and spiritual sphere and that World War Two might never have happened "if we carried the day."<sup>30</sup> However, twinned with this is the visceral awareness, captured in "Son of Man," one of Scott's last poems, that he cannot prevent innocent people from dying needlessly, when he has a nightmare about trying to take a wounded boy to a hospital through the conflict in Sarajevo. He is aware of the physical powerlessness of his writing when he turns to the reader in the last line and plaintively asks: "whit else could I dae?"<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Joy Hendry, "The Sympathetic Imagination: Scottish Poets of World War Two," in Eberhard, Bort, ed., *Borne on the Carrying Stream: The Legacy of Hamish Henderson* (Ochtertyre: Grace Note Publications, 2010): 204-227 (208-209).

<sup>27</sup> Tom Scott, "Introduction." *The Dirty Business* (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 1986), I-III (I).

<sup>28</sup> Joy Hendry, "Tribute to Tom Scott (From Text of Funeral Service)," *Scotia Review*, 21 (1995): 12-14 (13).

<sup>29</sup> Raymond Ross, "The Real Tom Scott," *Chapman*, 47-48 (1987): 17-23 (20).

<sup>30</sup> Tom Scott, "Vive MacDiarmid," *Chapman*, 22 (1978): 6-13 (12).

<sup>31</sup> Tom Scott, "Son of Man," in *Etruscan Reader II*, 44.

“The Paschal Candill” is based on Scott’s own experience of the Great Saturday Mass in the Vatican in Rome. The ritual of the candle is meant to cleanse the repentant observers of their sins. Scott said in interview that “the Mass itself is a poem, a great dramatic poem” and that “The Paschal Candill” attempts to capture a sense of that (Scott, as in n. 2, 53). The poem uses the Roman Catholic rites and rituals of Easter Mass as its own “polysemous veritism,” as a process to which many people can relate or that they can at least recognise. It is a rhetorical crescendo or sermon of a poem which opens with the Mass and then delves back into the Bible to Creation, the Flood, the coming of Christ, his sacrifice and then becomes a plea to the listener or reader to realise what is ill in the world, to confess it, and to try and purge the world of its sins. The poem is little different from Scott’s other poems in that it examines how religion is twisted and distorted by humankind, to suit their own vested interests rather than those of the collective. For instance, section VI of the poem is about “Love’s house” and all the obstructions that bar the ordinary person from entering:

Nae policeman can forbid ye thir delytes  
 Nae commissioner chairge ye entrance here  
 Nae hypocrite preacher fill your mouth with stour.

But Love’s thochts are no your thochts  
 My kintramen.<sup>32</sup>

The whole sequence is an appeal to the ordinary people of Scotland—“my kintramen”—to wake up and realise what a mess the world is in and how things must urgently change. It is Scott in his most didactic and zealously reformist guise, but the sincerity of his message is undeniable. Many of the poems in the sequence work by contrast, that is to say that Scott conjures up a Biblical or divine image and then sharply undercuts it with a scene from modern day Scotland. As such, Love’s house and its banquet of delights is contrasted with “the chippie open at sax o’clock / The milk bars doun the street / Whaur whures parade their beat” (*ibid.*, 20). Then he introduces a third element, which is the thing that he sees to be at risk:

This land

A land of mountains burns tarns  
 Hame of the eagle and the deer  
 Saumon and trout  
 The daethless drap of rain  
 And rins and feeds ascetic soil  
 Risand til the luft in the end (*ibid.*, 21).

Here the poet presents us with a pure landscape that is cleansing itself and then ascending to the skies in a celestial image. His attitude of wishing to

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<sup>32</sup> “The Paschal Candill,” *Agenda*, 30:4-31:1 (1992): 29.

protect Scotland from pollution and economic exploitation is not so different from many of the generations of writers who followed after Scott, such as John McGrath in *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (1981).

It is worth briefly comparing Scott's approach of mixing spirituality, transgression, damnation and redemption to the work of one of his friends and contemporaries, Sydney Goodsir Smith, and his masterwork *Under the Eildon Tree* (1948). *Under the Eildon Tree* is a poem sequence that is powered by an essentially Bakhtinian, Carnavalesque pattern of ego-death, or spiritual death, leading to some form of resurrection or salvation of the sinning, erring "Slugabed" character in his pursuit of an unattainable lover.<sup>33</sup> In Scott's poem, the poet only appears by way of the speaker undergoing a religious awakening, or a sudden realisation, and the rest of the poem is about the fate of others, whereas Smith's poem is almost entirely self-generated and decidedly non-God-fearing and self-destructively sybaritic. There is also the notable absence of drollery or wit in Scott's poem, but the idea of a certain fall leading to possible resurrection is present in both works. Maggie Fergusson, the biographer of George Mackay Brown, reminds us that Scott's "The Paschal Candill" was also inspired by Scott's impetuous romance with the painter Stella Cartwright, often problematically termed "the Muse of Rose Street," where Scott regularly drank in the company of other poets such as Goodsir Smith and Mackay Brown.<sup>34</sup> Behind this ostensibly religious poem, is a man leaving his wife for a woman nearly half his age:

It brocht intil my mind  
The Bride I wad yon nicht, what tho in dreaming,  
And wha, ever sensyne,  
Hes led me by the hand  
Throu mid-life's forest whaur nae licht wes  
Leamand ("Paschal Candill," 16).

Despite the risk that Scott could be labelled a hypocrite for writing a poem about religious purity on the basis of adultery, it is clear that "The Paschal Candill" is a poem wrought out of an intense personal conflict and that the poet did not simply affect his consideration of conversion to Roman Catholicism. As such, we must read the poem in the deeply morally earnest way in which it was first written. All of the main themes of Scott's work are united in this poem: there is the story of Genesis which is later explored in *The Tree* and there is a clear engagement with "anti-life phenomena" in section VI of the poem, which discusses forms of sacrifice and is continued

<sup>33</sup> Sydney Goodsir Smith, *Under the Eildon Tree* (Edinburgh: Serif Books, 1948), 20.

<sup>34</sup> Maggie Fergusson, *George Mackay Brown: The Life* (London: John Murray, 2006), 153.

at length in *The Dirty Business*. The image of Christ being sent down from on high to die for worldly sins is contrasted with Biblical locations presented in a present-day light. As such, we find the war dead at Cyrenaica alongside the bones of Pharaohs, and those who were drowned at sea (echoing Hamish Henderson's *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica*):

On the sands at Cyrenaica  
Skull and banes are liggand lowse  
Melled with rubble and desert boulders  
What ance were men  
Nou nocht but objects in the sun ("Paschal Candill," 19).

Scott argues that this was not a catastrophe "But the failure of twa thousand year / To teach what we're here to learn," and that these poor young men drank from "the cup their faithers had prepared for them" (*ibid.*, 19). The poem closes with an appeal to peace in the form of "Absalom / Wad God I had dee'd for ye!" (*ibid.*). Scott is vitally opposed to the thanatic death-drive towards war in society, and the idea of war being an ideology that can poison future generations is a theme further explored in his poems *The Tree*, *The Dirty Business* and even his final, and unfinished, poem *Views from Myeloma*. Indeed, after having been diagnosed with the rare form of plasma cell cancer called myeloma in the 1980s, Scott began to see cancer as a symptom of, and punishment for, the evils in a poisoned society. In writing about his cancer, Scott joins the company of poets who have used cancer to denote something wrong with the wider world they lived in at the time, often aligning such illnesses with political regimes or wars. In the 1930s, Hugh MacDiarmid's poem "An Ex-Parte Statement on the Project of Cancer" is set against the rise of fascism and draws parallels between it and the fact that cancer spreads and was becoming a more common disease. Although written nearly four decades after "The Paschal Candill," *Views from Myeloma* shows how Scott's attitude to the world and his reverence for living beings had not changed at all:

Let the march of destruction be everywhere hindered,  
halted, driven back and abandoned.  
Let Earth our home, our house, our city  
be also a temple sacred to Life.<sup>35</sup>

In a polluted society wracked with illness, Scott sees something akin to a Biblical reckoning like the "Flood," which is one of the opening sections of "The Paschal Candill". Here, only the "truly fittest shall survive. / The last indeed shall be the first" (*ibid.*). Long after renouncing his Roman Catholic phase in the 1950s, Scott is still presenting poems in the form of versified sermons with liturgical echoes:

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<sup>35</sup> Tom Scott, *Mir Poets Nineteen: Views from Myeloma (excerpts 17 and 18)* (Child Okeford, Dorset: Words Press, 1988), unpaginated.

Not three but four, in one, is Godhead,  
 not trinity but quaternity.  
 God the Father and God the Mother,  
 God the Son and God the Daughter,  
 now and ever, world without end (*ibid.*).

"The Paschal Candill" could be seen as a false start, as Scott would have us believe, and only good as an exercise in testing out his Scots and extending his poetic vision. However, it could also be seen as one of his most important poems and a vital achievement in his development as an artist. Hugh MacDiarmid once said that "only shallow minds fancy that they are being consistent."<sup>36</sup> Although Scott altered his stance, his faith in the world and the need to protect that world from malign forces remained undimmed all of his life. Shortly after MacDiarmid's death, Scott wrote that MacDiarmid was

a natural theologian (i.e. a student of reality) and it is because of this that he has poured intense scorn on orthodox religion that has lost all its inspiration (or murdered it) and is no longer anything but an empty, alienated form, far strayed from its own Christ.<sup>37</sup>

As such, he confirms that for him, his 'religious' inspiration comes from agape, love for humankind and for the earth.

Every poem within "The Paschal Candill" ends with an address to Scott's "kintramen" to jolt them out of ignorance or complacency. It is like a litany in its listing of the crimes we have committed against the world, in wars, pollution, our greed and misunderstanding:

Prometheus  
 (What man hes taken fire frae hevin?)  
 Slimmed a fell road up the luft  
 And brocht us back the atom bomb  
 God's fire given til monkey men ("Paschal Candill," 23-24).

In essence, for Scott, we are clever but far from all-knowing, especially of the consequences of what we are doing. The reader is guided throughout the poem towards a crescendo, in seeking a solution in the form of the candle burning down, absolving all sin. In poem VIII Scott relays to the reader his religious epiphany and seems to go against rational thinking by applying the same argument as above: that we think we know everything but we do not, and when our rational brain tells us something is wrong or beyond belief, how are we to know we are right?: "But wha sall walk and talk with God / On the fiery road that pride has made?":

The road of wisdom  
 I nevir owre-thranget  
 And nae machine  
 Can traival it

<sup>36</sup> MacDiarmid, *Metaphysics*, as in n. 11 above, 7.

<sup>37</sup> Scott, "Lament," as in n. 20 above, 21.

Can traival it<sup>38</sup>  
 Hiecher nor Everest  
 And a coorser climb  
 In a coorser clime ("Paschal Candill," 24).

This surrender to God and to the mystery of the universe does differ from Scott's other poems and is perhaps the main point of departure. The poem urges us to accept and admit our sins and then offer them up to a higher power for remission. Indeed, Part X suggests that Christ was crucified and then resurrected almost in vain as we have neglected his teachings; wildlife is being pushed to extinction, ecosystems destroyed, life forms poisoned or murdered, women are still as oppressed as at the time of the Bible and we will not be content until "we mak Saharas of our ain— / and nou it seems / the hail earth's mauvert by our godless schemes" ("Paschal Candill," 26). Scott's gravest fear is for a continued repetition of these mistakes until the earth is completely destroyed, urging us to think not of ourselves, but of those who follow us:

Dochters of Jerusalem  
 Greitna for me  
 But griet for yourselves  
 And for your bairns (*ibid.*, 27).

The closing section of the poem returns us to the Mass rites and asks us if we renounce the influence of the Devil and "surrender all ye ken for this unkennable?" in order to be reborn again "haill and clean" (*ibid.*). Scott then lists many of the sinners and imagines them as atoning for their sins and coming forward to be blessed:

Genius gane mad with social abuis and pride  
 Srievers wha wad feed the lambs on lees  
 Lawyers wha engage in creatand crime  
 Doctors wha have nae guid health to give  
 Priests wha turn a deaf ear til the Word  
 Painters, sculptors, wha look the other wey  
 Rievers of the puir  
 Wyters of the rich  
 Makars lovand words but no the Word

As i hevin, sua po yerd

Corrupters of the fowk  
 Unhalie pageantry, come furth

Forleit us uor skaths (*ibid.*, 29-30).

In Scott's surrender to the unknowable and ineffable, no-one is spared, not even he himself. Note how he describes "makars" as loving words but not

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<sup>38</sup> *Traival* in original version, later normailized as *travail*.

the “Word” of God. This submission to an almighty, higher power is certainly not a consistent characteristic of the rest of Scott’s oeuvre, but we also have to remember that his work is a process of dual meliorism; that of himself as an artist on the one hand and that of an artist trying to reform society and the world for the better on the other.

The fact that Scott openly admits that this task is beyond human powers and yet he still continues to try, is in itself a profound act of faith. Towards the end of his 1992 interview with Joy Hendry, Scott claimed that “I’m a reformer—always trying to make society better” and accepted that his later work was flawed for “a more gifted man would do it better, and I hope will” (Scott, as in n. 2 above, 71). In this light, Scott’s efforts can be seen as an attempt to tend the flame, to add to a body of work that will never be complete in its endless search for a New Jerusalem. While the poem affects a tone of almost God-like certitude, Scott’s personal life at the time of writing the poem was in turmoil, and the act of writing the poem “tore” him apart ideologically (*ibid.*, 55). The issue is not with Scott’s worldly faith, but with the surrender to the unknown represented by God. In this context, “The Paschal Candill” is an aberration, but as this paper has shown, many of its themes are those that Scott continued to explore throughout his writing life. The depth of his commitment cannot be taken lightly or dismissed. We have seen how Scott believed that his poetry was “prophetic” in the sense that it was “socially critical,” and that when writing “The Paschal Candill” he genuinely thought Jesus was an ideal role model for the Utopia (or New Jerusalem) that he had envisaged for the earth. At the same time he realised that Jesus in fact represented an ‘impossible’ ideal (*ibid.*, 50).

The question remains as to whether perhaps Scott was using Catholic imagery, litany and ritual merely as a prop for his poems, as his “polysemous veritism,” an affectation garnered from his many years of studying and appreciating the work of William Dunbar. The point has been made earlier both MacDiarmid and Scott have both been described as religious poets, and indeed Scott himself called MacDiarmid a “natural theologian” meaning a “student of reality.” However MacDiarmid plundered science and technical books for ideas and images for his poems, and he often used these without full knowledge or authority, as Christine De Luca’s playful but geologically precise poem “Not on a raised beach” reminds us. Yet this almost superficial use of materials does not prevent MacDiarmid’s poem “On a Raised Beach” from conveying a profound and powerful message about materialist and personal faith. It could be said that some elements of Scott’s religious poetry can be traced back to his aping of the styles and subject matter of the medieval makars, yet there is little doubt that by the time he came to write “The Paschal Candill” he was in the grips of a genuine crisis of faith, even if, by his own admission, he was



“out of [his] depth” with Catholicism (Scott, “Interview,” 1992, 51). Both MacDiarmid and Scott shared a deep faith in their craft and their drive to articulate or enact intellectual and spiritual change in their respective societies. The task of both men has been to find, in MacDiarmid’s words, the “transcendental” that is inherent “in the seeds of things” (MacDiarmid, *Metaphysics*, 22).

John Herdman surely had the measure of it when he wrote in the 1970s that “Scott’s original Marxist impulse was modified for a time by a strong religious impulse, and these two elements have now coalesced to give him a humanitarian viewpoint.”<sup>39</sup> This corresponds well with the idea of Scott’s life as a poet being one of meliorism and characterised by various spiritual stages and works. “The Paschal Candill,” then, is important in that it marks symbolically and definitively Scott’s breaking away from the tenets of organised religion but as a poem it also allowed him to extend his poetic scope and technique and to focus on themes that would become lasting and major concerns in his work. While Scott was not an orthodox Christian, he saw reality on earth as both concrete and transcendental, or lay and sacral, at the same time. He wished to see society overhauled and “utterly transformed and resurrected,” but he could not achieve this with his poetry, as his fundamental job all along was to “bear witness” to his times, “whether or not you have any effect on anybody” (Scott, “Interview,” 71). That certainly sounds like a bold and brave declaration of faith, even if the cause is doomed to failure from the very start. Thomas Crawford’s claim that Scott “is that rare thing, a genuinely religious poet” stands good to this day.<sup>40</sup> Tom Scott was a religious poet in that he truly believed in the worth of what he was doing and saw the mortal, suffering world as sacred, and sought to protect or improve it, without all of the concomitant trappings of organised religion.

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<sup>39</sup> For Herdman’s comment, see Ross, “The Real Tom Scott,” as in n. 29 above, 21.

<sup>40</sup> Crawford, *Akros*, 11 (1976): 69).